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THE SOVEREIGN SPIRIT

Acts 16:1-10

By

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Acts Lesson 39

The Sovereign Spirit Acts 16:1-10

Over 30 years ago, a friend of mine that I have long lost touch with wrote a paper that I have often thought about. I have modified and shortened it considerably, but it ran something like this:

That fateful week began and progressed as normal for the majority of Christendom. Oh, this week was quite different, but only a few Christians would notice—far too few.

One pastor arose early on Sunday to review the sermon that he had prepared. He would begin his three-point evangelistic message with a funny story. Then he had included a few Bible verses, the quote from *Time* magazine, and a story about a dramatic conversion. And, of course, he would conclude with an emotional appeal to come forward and make a decision. “Yes,” he thought, “this one has been planned perfectly. It ought to produce great results.” As he reread the sermon for the last time, it was obvious that he didn’t notice the difference.

Sunday morning services throughout the country went exactly as planned. Each sanctuary was full of smiling, well-dressed Christians. The services began with the doxology, prayer, announcements, a couple of hymns, and special music during the offering. Although the hymns sounded rather dead, it was no worse than usual. In fact, people responded to the ministers’ pleas, and the offerings were larger than usual. Even the invitations were a success. As the congregation finished the third verse of “Just As I Am,” many came forward for rededication, salvation, or church membership. As the people filed out the door to get home in time for the football game on TV, it was obvious that none of them had noticed the difference.

The week continued on flawlessly. The banquet Tuesday night was a huge success, as the church raised enough pledges for the down payment on the new sanctuary. The Wednesday evening prayer meeting also went on as usual. The few who came prayed that God would bless all of the missionaries. For the Friday night

high school social, the youth pastor had come up with some crazy new games that made it a roaring success. But no one noticed the difference.

A few church members even got to witness at work that week. Rick, for example, had been feeling guilty about not talking with Don. So at lunch he took a deep breath, pulled the booklet from his pocket, and read the laws to Don. Although Don didn't seem very interested, Rick plowed through the entire presentation. He left the booklet with Don and encouraged him to pray the prayer at the end to invite Christ into his heart. Rick felt a sense of relief that he finally had shared the laws. But Rick didn't notice. In fact, few Christians would have noticed, even in an entire year.

But there were a few Christians that had a most frustrating week. One pastor sat and stared at his Bible, but couldn't get anything out of it. He knew the Bible and he knew how to prepare biblical sermons. But the Bible had become a dead book to him. He was frustrated and perplexed. But he noticed the difference!

Some other believers also noticed. One man kept succumbing to lusting after an attractive woman at work. He couldn't get the victory, no matter how hard he tried. Another man angrily snapped at his wife and yelled at his kids. When he felt a twinge of guilt, he justified himself by blaming them for being insensitive to his needs. A small group that normally was overflowing with joy in the Lord and love for one another found themselves depressed and bickering. Several other Christians found themselves doubting their salvation, and even wondering if God existed. These believers were defeated, frustrated, and confused. But, they definitely noticed the difference!

When those at the church who had experienced a normal week heard about those who were having trouble, they weren't surprised. They knew that something like this would happen sooner or later. They knew that these other Christians were just too radical. Those whose week had gone well smugly thought, "It serves those fanatics right! You can't be excited about Jesus week in and week out!"

What was there to notice as different about this week? God decided to see which Christians were living in dependence on His

Holy Spirit, and which ones were just depending on their own intellect and human plans to live the Christian life. So, He completely withdrew His Holy Spirit from the earth for the entire week! Think about it—would you notice the difference?

My friend was making the point that it is easy to fall into routine Christianity, where we function in the flesh instead of walk in vital dependence upon God's Spirit. One of the main lessons of the Book of Acts is that the expansion of the early church was due to the working of the Holy Spirit. He was directing, moving, and empowering the apostles as they responded to His leading. If we want to see God working today in a similar fashion, we need to fight routine Christianity and rather, seek daily to submit to and follow the sovereign Spirit. The message of our text is,

Since the Holy Spirit is sovereign over His work, we must seek to follow Him as we labor for the Lord.

The text assumes that we, with Paul and Silas, are already seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33). If you are not living with that focus, you need to stop and confess it to the Lord, and yield yourself in obedience to His will for your life. Undergirding and woven through our text is the fact that the Holy Spirit is sovereign, and these men were obediently following His lead as they sought to do His work. There are four lessons:

1. The sovereign Spirit leads us to the right workers (16:1-2, 10).

We read that Paul came to Derbe and to Lystra (16:1). That was a radically courageous thing to do! Lystra was where Paul had been stoned, dragged out of the city and thrown on the garbage heap as dead. If I were he, I would not be inclined to go back to Lystra. But here, where he had suffered so terribly, and while he was still grieving over the falling out with Barnabas, God graciously brought into Paul's life this young man, Timothy, who would become like a faithful son to Paul.

Timothy's mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois (2 Tim. 1:5) were Jewish women who had become believers in Jesus Christ. Although Timothy's father was an unbelieving Greek, these women had taught Timothy the Scriptures from his childhood (2 Tim. 3:15). On Paul's first visit to Lystra, these women and the

young Timothy had gotten saved. By Paul's second visit, Timothy, who would have been in his late teens or early twenties, had established a good reputation among the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Just as witnessing the stoning of Stephen had made an indelible impression on Paul, so watching Paul get stoned had made a profound impression on young Timothy. As a result, he had resolved to follow Jesus Christ, no matter what the cost. So now Paul saw Timothy's commitment and invited him to join the missionary team. It was the start of a lifelong and life-changing friendship.

Not only Timothy, but also Luke soon joined the team. In verse 10, the first of the "we" sections of Acts begins. It ends at the end of chapter 16, as Luke stays in Philippi to shepherd the new church there, while the team moves on. It resumes again, six or seven years later, in 20:5 and runs to the end of Acts. Luke, the beloved physician, a Gentile, became a faithful worker with Paul.

These new relationships did not happen by chance. The Lord knows that we need fellow Christians of a kindred spirit to encourage us and to work with us in the cause of Christ. We need older believers like Barnabas had been to Paul. We need contemporaries, like Silas and Luke. And, we should ask God for some younger believers, like Timothy, that we can bring along in the faith. Ask the sovereign Spirit to lead you to the right people to be not only your friends, but also your co-workers in the cause of Christ.

2. The sovereign Spirit gives us wisdom in the right strategies for ministry (16:3).

Paul circumcised Timothy because of the Jews in those parts, who knew that his father was a Greek. Why did Paul do that? Many have criticized him for violating his own convictions against keeping the Jewish ceremonial law.

But Paul acted consistently with his convictions, even if it caused his critics to misunderstand him. In Galatians 2:3, Paul states that Titus, a Gentile, was not required to undergo circumcision. So why circumcise Timothy, but not Titus? With Titus, it was a question of whether a man is justified by grace through faith alone, or whether he must also keep the Law of Moses. It would have compromised the very gospel to circumcise Titus. But with Timothy, who was half-Jewish, it was a matter of causing needless

offense to unbelieving Jews. Circumcision would allow Timothy to accompany Paul and Silas into the synagogues where they often preached. So it was a matter of becoming a Jew to the Jews, so that he could win the Jews (1 Cor. 9:20). Paul did not want anything to hinder Jewish people from hearing and believing the gospel.

We all need to ask the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom from God's Word so that we know which convictions to take a stand for, and which areas we need to yield out of love. All too often, we stand firm where we ought to yield, and we yield where we ought to stand firm. Only the Holy Spirit can impart the wisdom we need as we grow to understand God's Word.

3. The sovereign Spirit enables His workers to strengthen the churches (16:4-5).

The missionary team traveled throughout the region, delivering the decrees of the Jerusalem Council. As a result the churches were being strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number daily. The Jerusalem decrees, as we saw, affirmed two things. First, they affirmed that salvation is not by keeping the Law of Moses, but rather is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Second, they asked Gentile believers, out of consideration for the Jews, not to engage in four things that were especially offensive to Jews: eating things sacrificed to idols; eating meat with the blood, or meat that had been strangled; and, fornication, which was commonly accepted in the pagan culture (15:29).

It strengthens churches to hear the gospel affirmed, that we are saved by God's grace through faith alone in what Jesus Christ provided for us on the cross. And, it strengthens churches to learn to walk in love, in submission to proper spiritual authority. These churches were not free to vote on whether or not to submit to the apostolic decrees. They willingly submitted to them. The aim behind the decrees was to show love and to avoid offending the Jews so that lost Jews could get saved, and believing Jews would not divide from the Gentiles in the churches.

We who are pastors and elders should seek to strengthen the church by helping every person understand the gospel clearly. And, we should help each member joyfully submit to God's Word and

to act in loving regard for others so as not to cause needless offense. Then the church will be strong and increase in numbers.

We've seen that the sovereign Spirit leads us to the right workers, gives us wisdom for the right strategies in ministry, and enables us to strengthen the churches. Finally,

4. The sovereign Spirit leads His workers to the right opportunities for ministry (16:6-10).

I can only touch briefly on each point. Note six things:

1) Opportunities come to those who are already serving, not to those who are doing nothing.

Sometimes people don't serve the Lord because they've never experienced a dramatic "call" to ministry. But this Macedonian call did not come to people who were doing nothing; it came to men who were actively serving the Lord. It was not a call to begin serving the Lord or to become a missionary, but rather a clarification of direction in an existing ministry. You can turn the steering wheel of your car all day long, but if the car isn't moving, you won't get anywhere. You can sit around and pray for God's direction for service, but you won't get it if you're not already serving Him. Start doing something to serve Jesus Christ, and He will redirect you if He needs to.

2) God sometimes leads us to the right opportunities by hindering us from the wrong ones.

We read (16:6) that these men were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" (a province in western Turkey). Next, they tried to go north into Bithynia (near the Black Sea), but "the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them" (16:7). What's going on here? Didn't the Lord want those in Asia or Bithynia to hear the gospel? Yes, later He did (18:19-21, 24-19:41; 1 Pet. 1:1), but not now. All we know is that the Holy Spirit is sovereign over His work, and that He stopped these faithful men from going into these two regions and redirected them into Europe at this time. He did not do it because of anything that He saw in the Europeans that was more worthy than what He saw in the Asians or Bithynians. The gospel does not come to people based on their merit, but rather based on God's sovereign, unmerited grace.

I'm going to raise a couple of questions that I cannot answer, but you can chew on them with me. First, how did the Holy Spirit forbid these men from going into these areas? It could have been through an audible voice. It may have been through circumstances that blocked the way. It may have been a lack of inner peace. It may have been physical illness on Paul's part, which was why he linked up with Luke at this point. The bottom line is, we don't know how the Spirit communicated these prohibitions, since the text does not say. But He uses many different ways of hindering us from heading in the wrong direction. We're not talking here about doing something that is against God's Word, but rather about doing good things that simply are not His will for us at this time.

The second question is, how did these men know that the hindrances were from the Holy Spirit and thus to be obeyed; and not from some other source and thus to be overcome? In 1 Thessalonians 2:18, Paul says that Satan had hindered him from visiting the Thessalonians. But here, it was the Spirit of God who hindered them. How did he know the difference? Sometimes God wants us by faith to keep knocking until closed doors are opened. At other times, the closed doors are His way of saying no. All I can say is, we need His wisdom and discernment to know the difference. I don't have any formulas for figuring it out!

- 3) God's leading us to the right opportunities is usually a progressive matter, not an instant revelation of the big picture.

Paul was feeling his way along at this point. After these two hindrances, if you had asked him what his plans were, he probably would have said, "I honestly don't have a clue!" In *The Tapestry* [Word], Edith Schaeffer says that she and Fran did not move to Europe with a plan to start L'Abri, which became a world-famous ministry. They moved there to minister to children. When their own children got into the university, they started bringing unsaved friends home to talk to their father about Christianity. It soon developed into the L'Abri ministry as they followed God's sovereign leading. Usually, knowing God's will is like driving in the fog. God just gives us enough light to see the next few feet. As we follow, He gives us the light we need to keep moving ahead.

- 4) When God reveals His will to us, we must make sure that it is from the Lord, and then be quick to obey.

The word "concluding" (16:10) indicates that the missionary team discussed the meaning of Paul's vision before taking action. The word means to join or knit together, or unite. As they talked, it all came together. As soon as they were sure of what God was saying, *immediately* they sought to go into Macedonia. They didn't form a committee and deliberate for months. They figured out what God wanted and went down to the harbor to buy tickets.

Does God direct us through visions in our day? The answer is, He can, but be careful! There are all sorts of crazy visions that people have that are not from the Lord. Benny Hinn told an audience on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (10/19/99) that the Lord had revealed to him that thousands of people from all over the world would be raised from the dead when people put their caskets in front of their TV sets tuned to that station. I don't know of any funeral homes that have been lacking for business yet!

On the other hand, Bill Bright tells of how late one night as he was studying with a friend for a Greek exam in seminary, he suddenly sensed God's presence in a way that he had never known before. He had the overwhelming impression that the Lord had unfolded a scroll of instructions of what he was to do with his life. Specifically, he knew that he was to devote his life to help fulfill the Great Commission by winning and discipling the students of the world for Christ. When he shared it with his Bible professor, Dr. Wilbur Smith, he paced back and forth in his office, saying, "This is of God. This is of God. I want to help you. Let me think and pray about it." The next day, Dr. Smith handed Bill a piece of paper on which he had scribbled, "CCC." He explained that God had provided the name for Bill's vision, Campus Crusade for Christ (*Come Help Change the World* [Revell], pp. 26-27).

The balance we need is on the one hand not to quench the Spirit, but on the other hand to examine everything carefully and hold fast to that which is good (1 Thess. 5:19-21). An obstinate apostle Paul could have plowed ahead into Asia or Bithynia against God's promptings not to do so. But the obedient apostle obeyed God's promptings and waited until the Spirit showed him where to go. Then he went immediately. The world has never been the same.

- 5) Often, when we obey, the reality does not match the vision.

Paul saw a *man* of Macedonia calling for help. He got there and found a small group of *women* gathered by the river, and one of these became the first convert. The second convert was a demon-possessed slave girl. Her conversion landed Paul and Silas in prison with their backs shredded by whips. It wasn't a glorious beginning, to say the least! But it's how the gospel began to take root in Europe, and we now know that the history of Europe has been forever different. Often when we obey God's leading and launch out into His work, the reality doesn't match the vision. But we must continue to obey what we know He called us to do.

- 6) The greatest help that we can give to people is to proclaim the gospel to them.

"Come over to Macedonia and help us" (16:10). Paul went and gave them the best help in the world: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved" (16:31). That is the most helpful message that we can give to anyone. It is the most helpful thing that we can do for anyone. We may have to feed a hungry man and provide for his other physical needs, before we can tell him. But if we only provide for his physical needs and neglect the spiritual, we have not given him the most important help.

If you were walking down the street and heard someone cry, "Help me! Help me!" you would be stirred to action. If you could not provide help yourself, you would at least make sure that the proper help got to this needy person. Ask God to burden your heart with the cry of the lost: "Come over and help me!" If you cannot go yourself, at least you will give and pray for missionaries to go. That's the best help we can give to a desperately lost world.

Conclusion

Let me leave you with the questions I asked at the beginning of this message: *Are you seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness?* If not, you need to do some serious thinking about your priorities. *Would you notice if God withdrew His Holy Spirit from your life this week?* If not, you need to get in tune with Him and seek to follow His leading for how He wants you to labor for His kingdom.

Discussion Questions

1. How can a Christian know if he is walking in true dependence on the Holy Spirit?
2. How can we know the Spirit's leading on issues where the Bible does not give specific help?
3. How can we know exactly where God wants us to be serving Him? What factors should we consider?
4. Does God still guide through dreams or visions? If we have such, how can we know if it's from the Lord?

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